

EUNUCHS IN POLITICS IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE

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Homer are largely explicable along the lines explored by Zielinski. But Aeschylus, living before the dissection of the Homeric corpus, was not to know this; and if, for example, Paris appeared in Homer under two different guises, Aeschylus might easily be influenced, consciously or not, by such a distinguished precedent. At all events there was nothing in the artistic inheritance of tragedy to suggest that consistent characterization was something to be assiduously pursued. The episodic nature of Homer will have had its influence on plot as well. Aeschylus, in so many ways the daring innovator, was slow to abandon the chorus-centred scene, in itself an indication that he had not made a complete break with the epic method of telling a story. He would have experienced at first hand the profound effect which epic recitals by expert singers can produce in the minds of a people more volatile than ourselves, and would know that as a well-told story unfolds itself, the audience is absorbed in the excitement of the moment.

In the process of evaluating Aeschylean technique from a written text, it is easy to work oneself into a frame of mind which cannot accept the beacon speech as a speech about beacons, but turns it instead into a speech about the avenging fire of Zeus; or looks for hidden meanings in the description of the chariot race in Sophocles' *Electra*. But the more complicated the approach to Greek Tragedy, the greater becomes the choice of mistaken interpretations open to us. Many of these would never have been made, if scholars had been content to adhere to the definition of Greek Tragedy which, after the investigation of many other possibilities, Tycho's father finally arrived at in his famous *Einleitung*.

‘Eine attische tragödie ist ein in sich abgeschlossenes stück der heldensage, poetisch bearbeitet in erhabenem stile für die darstellung durch einen attischen bürgerchor und zwei bis drei schauspieler, und bestimmt als teil des öffentlichen gottesdienstes im heiligtume des Dionysos aufgeführt zu werden.’¹

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EUNUCHS IN POLITICS IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE²

THE PROBLEM

Why Eunuchs? Primarily because they were important. No-one who has waded through the church histories of the fourth and fifth centuries or the numerous later Byzantine chronicles, or those lives of the saints which touch upon court life, can have failed to be struck by the frequent imputation that, in the Eastern Empire

¹ An early draft of this article was seen by Professor D. L. Page, in whom it excited the emotions of pity and terror to such effect that I felt obliged to rewrite the whole thing from start to finish. For the criticisms which he made—*ἦτοι κέαντες ἢ τεμόντες εὐφρόνως*—I am more than ordinarily thankful. The second version was very kindly scrutinized by Mr D. W. Lucas, who made numerous suggestions, all of which I have gratefully adopted.

² I should like to thank Professor A. H. M. Jones for his help and advice; he let me read the typescript of his forthcoming book on the Later Roman Empire, and this article owes a lot to his analysis. I should also like to thank Dr M. I. Finley, Professor N. Elias and the members of the staff seminar of the Department of Sociology of the University of Leicester for valuable criticisms.

especially, the real power lay in the hands not of the emperor nor of his aristocrats, but of his chief eunuch;¹ or alternatively that the corps of eunuchs as a group wielded considerable if not predominant power at court.² Yet the eunuchs were barbarians by birth and slaves into the bargain.³ The purpose of this paper is to explain why eunuchs held so much power in the imperial and aristocratic society of Eastern Rome, to put this power in the context of the socio-political developments of the later Empire, and to analyse some of the social functions of this power.

Yet here, right at the beginning, the objection might be raised that we are faced with nothing but a problem in historiography. Eunuchs might have been to Byzantine historians nothing more than women and gods were to Herodotus, convenient personal pegs to hang historical causes on. In itself this would not be without its interest. Eunuchs, like Court Jews in German states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, served as scapegoats.⁴ This was part of their regular function. But above and beyond this I hope to show that eunuchs did in fact exercise real power; that people who wanted important tasks immediately executed with the support of imperial authority regularly approached the court eunuchs rather than any other imperial officer or indeed the emperor himself. People believed that eunuchs exercised power and acted upon that assumption.

¹ E.g. Libanius, *Or.* 18, 152; Ammianus, 22, 3, 12 (Constantius II). Malalas, 340 (C.S.H.B.) (Valentinian I). Olympiodorus, frg. 13 (Honorius). Priscus, frg. 7; Malalas, 361; Cedrenus, 1, 587 (Theodosius II). Cedrenus, 1, 626 (at Zeno's death).

² Sozomen, *H.E.* 3, 1. Zosimus, 4, 22, 4 (Valentinian II and Gratian). *Idem*, 4, 23, 5 (Valens). *Idem*, 4, 28 (Theodosius I). Suidas, s.v. ἑλκεδῖς (Valentinian III). *J. Ant.* frg. 191, 194 (Theodosius II).

³ Castration was forbidden on Roman soil (*C.J.* 4, 42, 1-2) and the penalties were severe; Justinian made the penalty fit the crime (*N.J.* 142). Most eunuchs seem to have come from outside the borders (Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 47 and 58-9; Cedrenus, 1, 601; Theophanes, 1, 154), especially from the Abasgi (Procopius, *B.G.* 8, 3, 15-17, 19), at least in the sixth century. But in times of famine some parents are said to have castrated their children and sold them (Cedrenus, 1, 590); moreover general laws like this were not often rigorously enforced, so that some eunuchs may have been Romans. We know of one free volunteer, Mamas, who had been castrated for medical reasons (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Theodosius*, ed. E. Schwarz (Leipzig, 1930), p. 240). He became grand chamberlain. It is not inconceivable that some of those born eunuchoid also entered the service (Ambrose, *de viduis*, 75); Eutropius entered after manumission from private service (Claudian, *op. cit.* 1, 132, 142 f.); others were given as presents, presumably as slaves (*C.J.* 12, 5, 4; ? 473), but were to be freed on entering the palace (*ibid.*).

⁴ Cf. S. Stern, *The Court Jew, A Contribution to the History of the Period of Absolutism in Central Europe* (Philadelphia, 1950), pp. 4, 9-13, 32-49, 245-8. H. Schnee, *Die Hoffinanz und die moderne Staat, Geschichte u. System der Hoffaktoren an deutschen Fürstenhöfen im Zeitalter des Absolutismus*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1953-5), vol. 3, pp. 172 f., esp. pp. 189-91, 195-6, 225-8, 242. F. L. Carsten, 'The Court Jew', *Leo Baek Yearbook* (1958), pp. 140-56. In many interesting ways the Court Jews parallel court eunuchs. They were subject to the same obloquy and given the same characteristics by contemporaries. This encourages the conclusion that these characteristics (ambition, emotional instability, arrogance, avarice and oiliness, etc.) were the product of their common social situation rather than the direct consequence of castration. Court Jews were dependent upon the favour of the prince, but their rise to power was independent of the characteristics of any particular prince, and often took place in the context of a struggle between the ruler and the estates. The rulers had need of servants free from attachments to the religious and corporative associations; the Court Jews soaked up much of the unpopularity of measures initiated by the ruler, but gained immense wealth at the cost of social isolation and the risk of sudden denunciation. Like court eunuchs they had free access to the ruler.

The final question as to whether particular actions attributed by historians in antiquity to an eunuch were in fact instituted by that eunuch in his own interest, or by the emperor himself with the eunuch as a front, can never, with our sources as they are, be finally answered. It was difficult enough at the time.¹ Eunuchs were unpopular. Even an intelligent and well-informed contemporary like Ammianus took a somewhat provincial and prejudicial view. His hero and commander Ursicinus had in his opinion been insufficiently recognized and rewarded. He put the blame on the palace intrigues of malicious eunuchs, and on Eusebius in particular. But E. A. Thompson has shown that there may have been a serious and well-considered purpose in the various postings of Ursicinus.² By the same token Eusebius must be absolved of complete self-interest. The problem is more difficult with the annalistic compilers of the later Byzantine period. Many of their stories have an apocryphal ring about them. Anything strange or wrong was attributed to the court eunuchs; above all, anything unpopular. This may be valuable in showing the common attitude to eunuchs or for the analysis of their usefulness in soaking up criticisms which might otherwise have fallen upon the emperor. But it makes an accurate estimate of their powers difficult. Many of the acts which the grand chamberlain executed on the emperor's behalf must have been debited to the grand chamberlain's account. We cannot say, of course, which particular actions come under this category; we cannot say with certainty that any did; but it is unlikely that most writers had any accurate inside information. In this quandary we shall have to turn not only to historical anecdotes, but to the development of certain institutions which reflect the real and increasing power of eunuchs.

THE POWERS AND PRIVILEGES OF EUNUCHS

Whatever may have been the status of eunuchs in society at large, the rank which they held at court was almost the highest in the land. In the first part of the fourth century, the grand chamberlain (*praepositus sacri cubiculi*) seems to have been of senatorial rank;³ in the second half of the fourth century the title of *clarissimus* attached to the senators had been so depreciated as to make necessary the institutionalization of two new and superior titles, those of *spectabilis* and *illustris*. The highest title, that of *illustris*, was restricted at first to a very small group of prefects, generals and consistorian counts. By 384 the grand chamberlain was also reckoned *inter primas dignitates*.⁴ In the Eastern *Notitia Dignitatum*, which contains the established order of precedence, the grand chamberlain ranked fourth in order, coming after the praetorian prefects, the prefect of the city and the masters of the

¹ Julian did not really know whether it was Eusebius alone who prevented his having an audience with Constantius II or whether the emperor himself also did not want to see him. Julian, *To the Athenians*, 274A-B.

² Ammianus, 18, 4, 3 and E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Works of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 42-5.

³ *C.I.L.* vi, 31946.

⁴ *C.Th.* 7, 8, 3 (384); but cf. *C.Th.* 11, 16, 15 (382) which Ensslin (*R.E. Suppl.* 8, 558) interprets wrongly; see rather J. E. Dunlap, *The Office of the Grand Chamberlain in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (University of Michigan, Humanistic series, 14; New York, 1924), p. 184.

soldiers.¹ The same ranking was given in a Western law of 412, which is interesting in that it shows that the rank achieved by grand chamberlains in general was independent of the great individual power of the Eastern chamberlain, Eutropius.² In 422 the grade *illustris* was already depreciated and was split into two. The grand chamberlain was classed with the upper group which consisted of the prefects and the masters of the soldiers.³ And at the end of the fifth century this position was still maintained.⁴

But the grand chamberlain was not the only court eunuch to hold high rank. And while his tenure continued at the emperor's pleasure, and was very often of much longer duration than the three years held to be average for praetorian prefects,⁵ the ranks of *primicerius* and *castrensis* seemed to have been filled by regular promotion within the corps of eunuchs and were held for a statutory two years only.⁶ According to the *Notitia*, the *primicerius* was one of the most high-ranking *spectabiles*, and the *castrensis* was a member of the same grade.⁷ In the late fourth and during the fifth century, four further posts of high rank were created and filled exclusively by eunuchs.⁸ The number of high positions open to them was still further increased since it became customary for the empress to have a separate *cubiculum* with its own complement of high officers.⁹ Nothing reflects more clearly the tremendous and sustained influence

¹ Ed. O. Seeck, *Or.* 1, index; cf. *Oc.* 1, index.

² *C.Th.* 11, 18, 1 (412).

³ *C.Th.* 6, 8, 1 (422).

⁴ *C.J.* 3, 24, 3 (485/6) and 12, 5, 5 (Anastasius).

⁵ Cf. e.g. Socrates, *H.E.* 2, 2; Sozomen, *H.E.* 3, 1; Ammianus, 21, 15, 4 for the long tenure of Eusebius; and Theophanes, 1, 125, 127, 148 for Antiochus.

⁶ It could be inferred from *C.J.* 12, 5, 2 (428) that promotion to *comes domorum*, *castrensis* and *primicerius* went by seniority. This is partially confirmed by John of Ephesus (*Lives of the Eastern Saints*, trans. from the Syriac by E. W. Brooks, *P.O.* 19, 202) who says that Theodore retired before his time, as *castrensis*; and that *castrenses* normally retired after two years. But he also says that *praepositi* did the same, which is improbable. Does the Syriac really mean *primicerii*? On the analogy of the other *primicerii* (e.g. of the palatines) who served for two years only (*C.Th.* 6, 30, 14 (396)), it is likely that the *primicerii* of the *cubiculum*, and therefore to replace them the *castrenses* and the *comites domorum* also, served two years. *Contra* Dunlap, *op. cit.* pp. 204–5, 209–10, on the ground of the *primicerius*' importance. But the *primicerii* of the palatines and of the notaries were also important.

⁷ *Or.* 17; *Oc.* 14–15; *C.Th.* 6, 32, 1 (416).

⁸ The chief positions held by eunuchs in the palace and the earliest known date of their tenure were: (i) Grand Chamberlain (*praepositus sacri cubiculi*) 326. Codinus, *de orig. C'politani*, 18. (ii) Superintendent of the Bedchamber (*primicerius sacri cubiculi*) perhaps 312, more certainly by 326. *Ib.* and 21. (iii) Chief Steward of the Palace (*castrensis sacri palatii*) 343. Athanasius, *Hist. Ar.* 15; *Apol. contra Ar.* 36. (iv) Count of the Imperial Estates in Cappadocia (*comes domorum per Cappadociam*) between 379 and 414. *C.Th.* 6, 30, 2 (379); 11, 28, 9 subscript (414); *Not. Dign. Or.* 10; Dunlap, *op. cit.* p. 187. (v) Count of the Imperial Wardrobe (*comes sacrae vestis*) 412. *C.Th.* 11, 18, 1. (vi) Captain of the Bodyguard (*spatharius*) 447. Theodoret, *Ep.* 110. (vii) Keeper of the Purse (*sacellarius*) 474–91. *J. Ant. frg.* 214, 4.

⁹ Already by the reign of Constantine, Fausta was attended by eunuchs (Philostorgius, *H.E.* 2, 4) and Codinus (*de orig. C'politani*, 18 and 21) mentions two grand chamberlains in Constantine's court, though Ensslin doubts that any firm conclusion about their rank may be drawn from so late a source (*R.E. Suppl.* 8, 557). Certainly in 400 Amantius was *castrensis* to the empress Eudoxia (Marcus Diaconus, *Life of Porphyry*, pp. 36–7, 40); and by the reign of Theodosius II, and again at the coronation of Leo I and in the reign of Anastasius, there is evidence of separate *cubacula* (Theophanes, 1, 152; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *de caer.* 1, 91 (416 C.S.H.B.); *C.J.* 12, 5, 5). In 536 the empress had her own *sacellarius* (John of Ephesus, *P.O.* 18, 630, n. 1). In fact the two Caesars Gallus and Julian both had their own grand chamberlains in the middle of the fourth century (Ammianus, 15, 2, 10; 16, 7, 2).

which court eunuchs were able to bring to bear upon a whole succession of emperors than their occupation of a regularly increasing number of offices, and the high rank which went with them.

While imperial freedmen in the early empire were able at times to exercise vast power but were at most given the rank *inter praetores*, the chief eunuchs continuously achieved rank superior to the vast majority of nobles, and quite out of proportion to the formal duties of palace organization. In the highly centralized system of the later empire, with its detailed and established order of precedence, the exercise of informal power without formal recognition would have been very difficult. Besides, however important the rights of aristocratic birth and of wealth, and no one can deny that they were important, what gave most power in the later empire was the degree of association with the emperor. And the exercise of office near to the sacred person of the emperor entitled even eunuchs to honour and acknowledgement.

This proximity to the emperor and the assurance of his favour was the sole firm basis of court eunuchs' power.¹ Their duty to protect the emperor from intruders was of great importance in this respect. It served to emphasize the eunuchs' own freedom of access and their opportunities for informal persuasion.² And it gave them, as well, the formalized right of controlling audiences.³ It was Gallicanus, the chamberlain of the usurper Maximus, who apparently decided that St Ambrose should be received in the formal *consistorium*, and so wrecked his diplomatic mission.⁴ Julian in his letter to the Athenians, justifying his civil war against Constantius, claimed that he was frustrated of private interviews with the emperor by the grand chamberlain, Eusebius.⁵ On a humbler level it was through the services of Amantius, the *castrensis* of the empress Eudoxia, that Porphyry gained a rescript against pagans still practising in his home town.⁶

A further product of the eunuchs' closeness to the emperor was that those who wanted favours, either positions or policies, found it advisable to grease the palm of the court eunuchs and to get them to espouse their cause.⁷ When the Arians wanted support from the new emperor Constantius, they found it easiest to get at him by winning over the grand chamberlain Eusebius first. The lesser eunuchs and the empress followed suit, and the emperor was surrounded.⁸ To be sure we must be careful in the evaluation of the sources. Many such stories may have been based upon hearsay. But however that may be, there is enough reliable evidence that men of

¹ On occasions the emperor seems to have been surrounded by eunuchs alone (Cedrenus, I, 622); certainly even the grand chamberlain was within calling distance (Theophanes, I, 253).

² The grand chamberlain could enter the presence freely (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *de caer.* I, 97 442 (C.S.H.B.)); the other chamberlains could gossip with the emperor while performing their tasks (Ammianus, I4, II, 3; I8, 4, 2; Suidas, s.v. θαδίας; Zosimus, 5, I, 4).

³ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *de caer.* I, 87 (394 C.S.H.B.).

⁴ Ambrose, *Ep.* 24.

⁵ Julian, *To the Athenians*, 274 A-B.

⁶ Marcus Diaconus, *Life of Porphyry*, pp. 36 f.

⁷ Libanius, *Or.* 18, 149; Ammianus, 18, 4, 2; 20, 2, 3; Zosimus (4, 40, 8) tells how a governor, Gerontius, was accused by Theodosius of corruption and only just managed to escape by putting his whole fortune at the disposal of the eunuchs. Cf. also Sozomen, *H.E.* 4, 12, 16; Marcus Diaconus, *op. cit.* 26-7.

⁸ Socrates, *H.E.* 2, 2; Theophanes, I, 51, 53.

importance were willing to stake very considerable sums on the assumption that the persuasive powers of eunuchs were paramount. When Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, wanted to win the emperor over to his cause, he distributed considerable bribes both to the wife of the praetorian prefect and to the *magister officiorum*: each got a 100 lb. of gold and sumptuous furnishings. A similar amount went to the chief legal officer, the *quaestor* of the palace. But one of the two chief eunuchs received twice as much gold, and a further seven chamberlains (both male and female in this instance) shared between them similar furnishings and 380 lb. of gold in cash.¹

In addition to favours for others, eunuchs were not slow to gain privileges for themselves. They exacted fees for audiences;² and by the fifth century they exacted a sizeable commission from everyone appointed to public office. It was a token of their influence in the process of selection. Chrysaphius demanded a payment even from a newly appointed patriarch of Constantinople; nor was he put off by the primate's plea that in order to pay up, church plate would have to be sold.³ Justinian, even when he abolished payment for office, allowed the fees of eunuchs to survive.⁴ And there is further evidence for the privileged position of eunuchs to be found in the law of 430 by which chamberlains alone were exempted from the payment of half the caducous or confiscated land for which they had petitioned.⁵ Some of them, claimed Ammianus, were not above plotting against those whose possessions they coveted.⁶

It can thus be seen that the consistent exploitation of these opportunities led eunuchs to consolidate usage into privilege; such privileges brought wealth, and wealth can be considered as both an index of their power and a reinforcement of it. The fortunes accumulated by eunuchs, even by ones not noted for their avarice, were enormous.⁷ The wealth of Narses was legendary;⁸ the bequests of Calapodius and Antiochus, which seemed to have survived as entities for near on two centuries, were sufficiently large to require between them nearly one-fifth of all the accountants who managed the church lands in four dioceses.⁹ The fortune of Theodore, a pious eunuch who retired before his time, as *castrensis*, is most illustrative. His fortune amounted to 1500–2000 lb. of gold, plus silver, slaves and rich clothing.¹⁰ One hesitates to think what an impious eunuch could have acquired. For this fortune alone was equal to that of a very wealthy eastern senator. It can do nothing but reflect the socio-political power of eunuchs that they managed to expropriate so large a slice of the economic surplus and accumulated wealth.¹¹

¹ *Ac. Occ.* 1, 4, 224, 293.

² *Vita Melaniae* (*Analecta Bollandiana*, viii, 1889, 29), 1, 11.

³ Evagrius, *H.E.* 2, 2; Theophanes, 1, 150–1.

⁴ *N.J.* 8, *notitia*: a proconsul of Asia had to pay 63 *solidi* to the accountants of the *cubiculum*, an ordinary governor 9 *solidi*.

⁵ *C.Th.* 10, 10, 34; eunuchs had various other privileges. *C.J.* 12, 5, 2 (428); *C.Th.* 7, 8, 16 (435).

⁶ Ammianus, 18, 4, 3.

⁷ John of Ephesus, *Lives*, *P.O.* 19, 202; Zosimus, 4, 5, 3–4.

⁸ *Liber Pontificalis*, 63 (ed. L. Duchesne (Paris, 1886), 1, 306); Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Franc.* 5, 13 (19).

⁹ *C.J.* 1, 2, 24, 11 (530).

¹⁰ John of Ephesus, *Lives*, *P.O.* 19, 200–205.

¹¹ The same Theodore was given a pension of 1000 *solidi* p.a. when he had dispersed his capital in charity (*ibid.* 205). This was more than the pay of a *dux* (*C.J.* 1, 27, 2, 20–1).

Proximity to the emperor had yet another consequence. It led to the selection of eunuchs for special tasks. Invested with imperial authority and high rank, eunuchs were sent on special missions.¹ Eusebius was sent to quell an incipient revolt in the Gallic army by bribing the rebel leaders.² And later in his career he was given the delicate duty of persuading the pope, Liberius, to condone Arianism.³ Eutropius was sent by Theodosius the Great to consult a holy hermit in Egypt about the outcome of his battle against the usurper Eugenius.⁴ Chrysaphius was instrumental in organizing a plot to assassinate Attila, and the eunuchs' power is reflected in the fact that when Attila uncovered the conspiracy and demanded the surrender of Chrysaphius on the threat of invasion, there was sufficient support at court for Chrysaphius for the emperor to run the risk of calling Attila's bluff.⁵

Certainly Eusebius, Eutropius and Chrysaphius were exceptional. In their time they wielded nearly absolute power. But there are many other humbler examples.⁶ And it was this consistent exploitation of the emperor's need for servants he could trust,⁷ and the loose demarcation of jurisdiction, typical of a patrimonial bureaucracy, which together paved the way for the extensive informal powers of eunuchs, many of which crystallized into exclusive privileges. This is not to say that eunuchs considered as a body, let alone as individuals, were the major political force in the state. Their power rested upon their personal contact with the emperor, and was usually limited to the court. In the provinces the hereditary and traditionally legitimate powers of the aristocracy, church, and army were paramount; and at court too their representatives competed for the emperor's favour. Yet the power of eunuchs was both great and significant enough to pose a problem. It was so firmly entrenched that the two upstart emperors (Julian and Maximus) who attempted to do away with eunuchs, both failed to establish an effective alternative.⁸ Julian's policy was of all things unpopular.⁹ But not only that; its reversal was all the easier because eunuchs fulfilled a vital function. They acted as a lubricant preventing too much friction between the emperor and the other forces of the state which threatened his superiority. Constantine, with the eunuch Eusebius as his chief executive, managed both to keep

¹ There are many examples; e.g. *Vitae vivorum apud monophysitas celeberrimorum*, ed. E. W. Brooks in C.S.C.O., scr. syr., ser. 3, vol. 25, 9; Cedrenus, 1, 581; Jordanes, *Getica*, 42, 224; Ammianus, 20, 8, 4. These tell of rather less famous eunuchs than those in the text.

² Ammianus, 14, 10, 5.

³ Athanasius, *Hist. Ar.* 35-8.

⁴ Sozomen, *H.E.* 7, 22; Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 312-13.

⁵ Priscus, frg. 7-8, 12-13.

⁶ Cf. Marcellinus, *comes, chronicon* (M.G.H., *A.A.* XI), 83, a. 449; 101, a. 519. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *op. cit.* 1, 92 (421-2), and 1, 93 (428 C.S.H.B.); two attempts at king-making.

⁷ E.g. Ammianus (21, 16, 8) speaks of Constantius' fear of conspiracy and his tireless investigation of the slightest suspicion.

⁸ Julian executed Eusebius and his followers for their part in the execution of Gallus, and dismissed both eunuchs and other palace attendants from service. The pretext for the dismissal of the eunuchs was that, being celibate, he had no need of eunuchs. More likely the real motive was to show that he was not subject to the same influences as Constantius. Socrates (*H.E.* 3, 1) says that Julian found everyone indignant at the eunuchs' power, and Theophanes (1, 71-2) records that he wanted to show Constantius up as unjust. We do not have any information about the reasons for Maximus' failure to live up to his initial declaration, that he would have no eunuchs at court. Cf. Zosimus, 4, 37, 2 and Ambrose, *Ep.* 24, 2.

⁹ Socrates, *H.E.* 3, 1. He was stripping the monarchy of its necessary pomp.

the army from getting above itself, as Ammianus says, and to avoid giving too many honours to the nobility.¹ The several accounts of plots against over-powerful generals, often attributed to emperors but engineered by eunuchs, are symptomatic of the same conflict and the eunuchs' role in it.²

A SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The problem of the political power of eunuchs has never been adequately tackled, either because modern historians thought that it offended propriety or because the position of eunuchs could be superficially explained in psychological terms. Eunuchs exercised their power, the traditional view maintained, under 'weak' emperors, by means of 'subtle flattery', oily insinuation and unsavoury ambition reinforced by their sexual frustration. Over the long road from Ammianus Marcellinus in the fourth century through Gibbon in the eighteenth to Hug, Dunlap and Herter in the twentieth century this has been thought sufficient.³

What can be said against this explanation is not necessarily that it is untrue, but that it is inadequate. The most significant aspect of the power held by eunuchs is its consistency, its repetitiveness from the middle of the fourth century onwards. No sooner had one eunuch been burnt because of his arrogance, or executed after a battle because his power threatened all other forces in the state, or compulsorily retired to a monastery as the result of political intrigue,⁴ no sooner had one eunuch been eclipsed, than another took his place at the apex of formal power and within a few years either he, his successor, or the eunuchs as a body had accumulated considerable informal influence as well. We should be wary of evaluations of emperors as 'weak', which are based exclusively or mainly on whether eunuchs held power in their reign. For eunuchs flourished under powerful soldier emperors like Valentinian I, even under Theodosius the Great, just as under an idle homosexual fop like Theodosius II.⁵

We are confronted here with something more than the weakness and virtues of individual emperors. To be sure, it is not only fruitful but indispensable to view history in this dimension, as a mosaic of the individual actions of separate individuals; without a doubt we have to discuss the personalities and achievements of individual actors. But there is another dimension. Emperors as individuals delegated power to different barbarian, ex-slave eunuchs, but the whole series of eunuchs cannot be explained satisfactorily exclusively in terms of their individual actions. It was not merely coincidental that they all appointed eunuchs to positions of power, nor was it exclusively determined by the psychological make-up of each emperor. The con-

¹ Ammianus, 21, 16, 1-2.

² Theophanes, 1, 197; Marcellinus, *op. cit.* 90, a. 471; *J. Ant.*, frg. 201, 2; 201, 4; Zosimus, 4, 23, 5.

³ Ammianus, 18, 5, 4; Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ed. Bury, vol. 2, p. 245; Hug, *R.E.* Suppl. 3, 454; Dunlap, *op. cit.* p. 180; Herter, *R.A.C.* s.v. Effeminatus. But for more sensible views cf. S. Runciman, *Byzantine Civilisation* (London, 1933), pp. 203-4, and best of all K. A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (Yale, 1957), pp. 354-8.

⁴ Cf. the fates of Rhodanus: Malalas, 340; Eutropius: Philostorgius, *H.E.* 11, 6; Antiochus: Cedrenus, 1, 600.

⁵ Malalas, 340; Zosimus, 4, 28; Cedrenus, 1, 587.

tinuing power position of eunuchs must be considered then rather as a socio-political institution in itself, a patterned regularity, a phenomenon to be explained not only by its individual manifestations but with reference to other broad social factors. It is this generality which should be approached first.¹

CHANGES IN THE POWER STRUCTURE

Political eunuchism as an institution arose in response to and gained a new weight in society because of changes in the power structure of society as a whole. Political development in the Roman Empire can be seen as the gradual concentration of power in the hands of the emperor, and of his direct nominees holding office in the patrimonial bureaucracy. In the early days of the principate wide areas of self-government were left to the cities through the unpaid services of avocational (non-professional) notables. Taxation was light; the senate ruled the internal provinces of the empire by means of its own appointees; the emperor was only *primus inter pares*, and often had friendly and personal relations with his aristocratic peers. Trajan's surviving correspondence with his provincial governor Pliny and Hadrian's dinner parties are typical examples. They could not conceivably be paralleled in the later empire, the so-called *dominate*. The weak point of the principate had been its legitimation, not as a system, but in its justification of the primacy of any particular man or family. The admission that the emperor and the aristocrats were social equals inevitably led to the idea that any one might replace any other. To confirm his position the emperor had to minimize the power of aristocrats, and secure the loyalty of the standing army, through taxes raised by the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy was at first the extension of the administration of the private estates of the first emperor Augustus. Moreover the submissiveness implicit in the hierarchic organization of the bureaucracy, and the long working career which alone enabled expertise in it, at the beginning excluded aristocrats. However, through the increasing prestige associated with wielding the delegated power of the ruler, the bureaucracy came by the end of the first century A.D. to be staffed by the second estate of the empire, the equestrians or knights.

Since the peasantry were diffused and had no organization by which they could express their interests, we can enumerate the constituent elements in the power constellation as follows: (i) the emperor; (ii) his patrimonial bureaucracy consisting of personal appointees with the social status of knights; (iii) the army, recruited from the peasantry and officered by regulars with the social status of knights and access on retirement to the bureaucracy; (iv) the cities administered locally by notables with access in recognition of services to the honorary status of knights or senators; (v) the senators themselves, the cream of the hereditary landlords, who renewed their social position in each generation by holding office for a short term only (rarely more than two years) in an area where they had no possessions, or as supreme military generals with an under-staff of professionals. The senators were at once the greatest threat to the emperor and the cynosure of lower men's ambition; promotion to the

¹ Cf. N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Basel, 1939), vol. 2, p. 2.

senate was in the emperor's and his servants' estimation the highest reward. The organization of the empire which gave senators the positions of greatest honour, and yet the greatest constraint on long tenure of office and the greatest exposure to persecution, confiscation of goods and execution, is sufficient evidence of the tension in the power structure.

The emperor could maintain his position only by maintaining a balance of power between constituent elements. The appointment of the praetorian prefect as chief executive of the government from the equestrian estate, and his combination of military and fiscal authority were significant indications of which way the balance was turning; away from the senatorial aristocracy towards the consolidation of the emperors' supremacy over his social rivals. In the crises of the third century brought about by the barbarian invasions, it was the technical efficiency of the bureaucratically organized administration and army alone which saved the empire. To minimize risks of amateurish defeat in battle, the emperor increasingly excluded senators from responsible gubernatorial or military positions and arranged for the collection of taxes from cities by way of professional tax collectors under the general supervision of the traditional local gentry. The empire was saved from barbarians and from regional fragmentation. For the military emergency and the supremacy of the army and of the equestrians had thrown up a plethora of imperial pretenders, each the candidate of rival armies; while the civil wars had bled the country of the accumulated capital of the local gentry and to a lesser extent of the senatorial aristocracy.

The winner of the last scrimmage of the third century, an Illyrian peasant soldier, Diocletian was faced with a different balance of power from that of the principate. The senatorial aristocracy had high social esteem, but, as a body, had only localized power. Its individual members were by lack of training excluded from the efficient exercise of military or bureaucratic power. The bureaucracy had grown beyond the palace, and was headed by equestrians and divided into separate ministries with an organized jurisdiction and an established order of promotion. The army officered exclusively by equestrians offered the greatest chance of social mobility, and the biggest threat to established authority.

Diocletian and his successor Constantine together by their reforms established a system by which the equestrian order was assimilated to the old senatorial order; military power was divided between palace and local troops, and military power was separated from fiscal power, while the size of individual commands was greatly decreased. Similar developments took place in the bureaucracy. Staff was increased to gain greater control over the populace and greater revenues, but the area of individual authority was diminished. The legitimation of the emperor was heightened by his deification.

The elements in the new power situation thus were (1) the emperor deified or in Christian times the vice-gerent of God on earth;¹ (2) a large and by former standards very efficient professional bureaucracy, separate from the army and divided into

¹ Cf. e.g. 'The emperor is one, image of the one all-ruling God', Eusebius, *de laude Const.* 7 (G.C.S. 7, 215), and K. M. Setton, *Christian Attitudes towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century* (New York, 1941), for the interrelation of the Christian idea of the emperor and of God.

ministries; the lower ranks were hereditary occupations; the upper ranks, upon retirement only, gave access to the new nobility (which is a significant separation of administrative power and social prestige); (3) the army, recruited from the peasantry and from barbarians living on the borders of the empire, divided into border troops, heavy reserve and imperial guard, organized in small units and officered by professionals, who on retirement received ennoblement; (4) the cities, much fallen in prestige, with vestigial autonomy and a hereditary local gentry who were dragooned into being collectively responsible for the payment of taxes which were high; (5) a new nobility made up of: (*a*) great landlords and their immediate descendants, who might be invited by the emperor to fill office for a very short period, (*b*) upwardly mobile lesser landlords, originating in the local gentry, who served semi-professionally as provincial governors or bureaucratic executives, (*c*) high army officers both serving and retired, often of barbarian origin, (*d*) retired professional bureaucrats.

The tensions at work in this constellation may be seen from the developments which actually took place over the next two centuries. Where previously the emperor had been able to control the aristocracy by the persecution of individuals, and by means of the professional equestrians in the army and in the bureaucracy, the complete victory of the equestrians and the eclipse of the cities had left only one unified upper order. To be sure entry into this order was controlled by the emperor and given only upon office, that is, upon the performance of certain services. But there was a constant and powerful tendency in both east and west for the aristocracy to expect to hold office as a matter of birthright and as a profitable sinecure. The second tendency, one reinforced by the high level of taxation, was centrifugal in direction: a tendency for the local landowners to resist the tax-collecting claims of the bureaucrats. On the other side of the balance sheet, the division of the army into different corps of differing prestige and smaller units, plus the theocratic (or more correctly cesaropapist) legitimation of the new order, reduced considerably but by no means eradicated rebellions and usurpations. The unified honour system, which gave everyone of importance an exact position in the hierarchy, emphasized the overall superiority of the emperor. But it also accentuated the major problem the emperor had to face. In so far as efficiency in executing the major tasks of government, that is, the collection of taxes, the administration of justice, the supply of the army, and its command, depended upon the skill and experience of his chief officers, any step the emperor might take towards the lengthening of their service to increase their experience, or any reward he might give them in terms of wealth or prestige in the only way available to him, and in the only way they wanted, was likely to increase the threat they represented to his survival as sole emperor.

THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF EUNUCHS

In other societies a similar general problem has occurred; namely the problem of conflict between an autocratic government aided by a patrimonial bureaucracy on the one hand, and on the other the military power of a professional army and a centrifugally inclined hereditary aristocracy. Yet in by no means all such societies have

eunuchs risen to power. A structural analysis of developments in the power structure of the Roman Empire is indispensable. Without it we cannot delineate the functions of political eunuchism; we cannot analyse its contribution to the maintenance of the socio-political order of the Roman Empire; nor can we show why eunuchs came to power in the fourth and fifth centuries rather than before or after. Nevertheless, such an analysis cannot by itself explain the rise and survival of political eunuchism rather than of any other institution with the same function. It does not explain, why eunuchs in particular rather than any other analogous group? For this we shall have to turn to a more detailed examination of the specific traits of eunuchs and of Roman culture.

Eunuchs, in the later Han and T'ang dynasties, were able to rise to positions of power when the emperor was deified and the executive ministers were excluded from intimacy.¹ It was in the same conditions that eunuchs became powerful in the later Roman Empire. The ritual of an audience became elaborate and compared with republican times servile.² It was a mark of humility on the part of Valentinian II that he forgot his imperial dignity sufficiently to kiss the head and hands of his sisters.³ To kiss the bottom of the emperor's robes was the peak of some men's careers⁴ (*Adoratio*). The emperor's *concilium* changed its name and its tenor. It became at first the *consistorium* and finally the *silentium*.⁵ St Ambrose on a diplomatic mission for Valentinian II objected strongly to being received in such a formal atmosphere.⁶ Negotiation was impossible, persuasion out of the question. By keeping to himself the emperor gained in prestige but lost in contact with his subjects. Synesius of Cyrene complained bitterly about this to the emperor Arcadius. Nothing, he said, is so bad as shutting the emperor away from public sight. The emperor should lead his troops in person as he used to do; he should travel around the provinces in person and see for himself how his people are faring.⁷

In many cases the exercise of power leads to isolation. This is to the leader's advantage when, like the captain of a ship, he is secure in the legitimacy of his authority. But the Roman emperors had to reaffirm their legitimacy by their divinity, reinforce it with a ritual which served to emphasize their superiority over humans, and each rebellion or palace plot served only to emphasize their insecurity. Absolute power is correlated with absolute isolation. There is no need to exaggerate, but the atmosphere in which nobles could mix with the emperor was completely different in the fourth century from the first. Gallus Caesar like Harun al Raschid wandered in disguise through the streets and inns of Antioch, asking people what they thought

¹ Ch'ien, T-S., *The Government and Politics of China* (Harvard, 1950), p. 31.

² Cf. A. Alföldi, 'Die Ausgestaltung des monarchischen Zeremoniells', *Mitt. des deutschen arch. Instituts*, XLIX (1934), 1-117. He argues forcibly for the gradual development of elaborate ritual and exposes the general attribution of its introduction by Diocletian as little more than a literary *topos*. But then how does one explain the fact that the literary *topos* centres so frequently around Diocletian? The two views are not irreconcilable: a general development of ritual with additions by Diocletian.

³ Ambrose, *de obitu Valentiniani*, 36. Cf. the story of a doctor who sat down to treat a bed-ridden emperor without permission. Marcellinus, *comes, chronicon* (M.G.H. A.A. XI), 88, a.462.

⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *de caer.* I, 84 and 86 (C.S.H.B. 387, 392).

⁵ Cf. *N.J.* 62, 1, 2. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *op. cit.* I, 86 (C.S.H.B. 393).

⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 24.

⁷ Synesius, *de regno*, P.G. 66, 1076c, 1080, 1100.

of him.¹ The comparison of the Byzantine empire with the Abbasid Caliphate and the very fact that a Caesar had to go to such lengths are not without their significance. Most emperors did not have Gallus' sense of adventure. And to rule effectively the man at the top needs information. The rise of eunuchs is not to be attributed to their 'skilful flattery and shrewd insinuations'.² There is more to it than that. Eunuchs met a distinct need, the need of a divine emperor for human information and contact.³

The power position of eunuchs stemmed in the first place then from their intermediary position between a deified and isolated emperor and those about whom the emperor wanted information or who wanted favours from the emperor. Governors and bishops, nobles and vicars who wanted strings pulled had access to the emperor only through the grand chamberlain, the chief eunuch, and his services had to be paid for. From being a mere channel of information, through the exploitation of informal influences such as the patrimonial bureaucracy permitted, the grand chamberlain in particular and the corps of eunuchs in general expanded their power well beyond the formal confines of palace administration. But the continuity of their power as individuals depended upon the direct patronage of the emperor, and the sphere of their power was limited as it radiated from the court.

Secondly, their power depended upon the tension between the autocratic emperor and the other power elements in the state whose exercise of power threatened the emperor's supremacy.⁴ Yet the emperor had to entrust the execution of his commands to some of his subjects and the exercise of imperial authority inevitably invested its bearers with high status. The traditional bearers of this delegated authority, backed by the system of imperial justice (i.e. the systematic protection of traditional proprietary rights), were precisely the people who most threatened the emperor's legitimacy and his universal power. Yet aristocrats had to be given power. But in the fourth century there were no equestrians to counterbalance them. Aristocratic power was limited by collegiality and short tenure, but the danger implicit in the situation can be seen in the growth of feudal *potentiores* in the west, and in their resistance to taxation and to the levy of recruits for the army.

Since power, and especially that power whose major source is derived from the centre, is limited, any exercise of power by non-aristocrats limited the power of aristocrats. Indeed the authority exercised by eunuchs not only by-passed the aristocracy but also served to supervise them.⁵ The search for executives of lowly or foreign origin free from aristocratic ties and dependent upon royal favour has been

¹ Ammianus, 14, 1, 9.

² Dunlap, *op. cit.* p. 180.

³ Especially if the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* represent fourth-century opinion and if they allowed their opinions to enter their historical judgements the following passage might be of interest: 'under Elagabalus, when everything was sold by the eunuchs—a class of men who desire that all the palace-affairs should be kept secret, solely in order that they alone may seem to have knowledge of them and thus possess the means of obtaining influence or money' (Loeb translation). S.H.A., *Severus Alexander*, 45, 4–5.

⁴ In comparative evidence the power of eunuchs is put in the same context, namely the emperor's desire to liquidate rival political cliques. Cf. H. S. Levy, *Harem Favourites of an Illustrious Celestial* (Taiwan, 1958), pp. 17–18. P. A. Tschepe, S.J., *Histoire du royaume de Ts'in* (777–207 B.C.) (Shanghai, 1909), p. 360; and Zosimus, 2, 55.

⁵ 'Since his castration deprived him of hopes of the purple, he persuaded the emperor to make him patrician and consul.' So Philostorgius (*H.E.* 11, 4) of Eutropius.

common to many kings and most notable in those who have struggled against the traditional or hereditary interests of the aristocracy. But whether we take the service nobility of Peter the Great, the incipient bureaucracy of Prussia, or the commoners of Henry II, none wielded delegated imperial authority so much in the emperor's interest as the eunuchs of the Chinese and Byzantine empires.¹

There is no specific ancient evidence that Byzantine emperors used eunuchs with a clear vision of their superiority over functionally comparable groups. Yet the very fact that eunuchs, in spite of their unpopularity with the aristocracy, in spite of their despised status, were constantly invested by emperors with high rank and great power, does in some measure confirm the hypothesis that this was done to counteract the power of the nobles. Nonetheless the following analysis is not presented on the assumption that it was directly perceived by contemporaries, but that, whether it was perceived or not, the qualities of eunuchs could not but have influenced the role they played in politics.

This may appear in its sharpest light when eunuchs are compared with other groups. Let us take for example the *notarii*, a body of short-hand writers who took notes at meetings of the imperial council. They were recruited in the first half of the fourth century from lowly classes, probably because of the long training required to acquire a manual skill, traditionally despised. Yet their knowledge of state secrets acquired in the course of their job and their personal contact with the emperor made them suitable for executive and supervisory jobs. They gained power and prestige. And by the end of the fourth century they had already become little more than a fashionable body ignorant of short-hand and holding sinecures, with the status of *clarissimi*.² They had to be rewarded in conventional terms of high status and rank, and were thus assimilated to the aristocracy; they both penetrated into and were penetrated by the aristocracy.

By contrast the corps of eunuch chamberlains could never be assimilated into the aristocracy. Their origin as slaves and barbarians, their physical deformity and the emotions it aroused, their easy recognizability, were all against it. They were completely dependent upon the emperor and had no natural allies in society, no other retreat than his protection.³ Nor could they, unlike others, gain acceptance by the social mobility of their sons.⁴ In this respect they were like the clergy of the Middle Ages; but unlike them they had no corporate existence by which they could transmit inherited wealth.⁵ Though the existence of a strong clergy might preclude the

¹ Wittfogel (*op. cit.* p. 356) sees the rise of eunuchs in the T'ang and Ming dynasties as coinciding significantly with the attacks upon the hereditary power of nobles through the establishment of the examination system and the restriction of *yin* prerogatives.

² *C.I.L.* vi, 1710; *I.L.S.* 2949.

³ This is all the truer if they were barbarians. Cf. Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 187.

⁴ Eunuchs seem to have a desire for wives and children. Their acquisition by purchase of both in China was a sign of their power, at once an attempt at evading the appearance of being a eunuch and at transmitting wealth. Acolius, *praepositus* under Valentinian III, had an adopted son (Constantius, *Vita Germani*, 39 (M.G.H., *S.R.M.* 7, 279)).

⁵ Eunuchs by a decree of Constantius were allowed to make wills (*C.J.* 6, 22, 5 (352)), but even so they could hardly be compared to the institution of the Church. Cf. Procopius, *Anecdota*, 29, 13.

extensive use of eunuchs, the non-corporative character of eunuchism is much more favourable than the use of clerics to the maintenance of the emperor's power.

The complete dependence of eunuchs as individuals upon the emperor made their exercise of power more tolerable to all parties. Like Court Jews in German states they took the blame for many unpopular actions, and like Court Jews they could be sacrificed when the outcry was too great.¹ Their accumulated wealth, often enormous, could then be redistributed by the emperor to his favourite supporters; the aristocracy would breathe more easily now that a threat to their power and honour had been dramatically removed.²

Yet the very exclusion by which eunuchs were faced, the hatred they met all around them, must have strengthened their cohesion as brothers in misfortune.³ And compared with ambitious aristocrats, amateurs who fought their way competitively to the top as individuals, at best with patronage, and held office for a short time, eunuchs were lifetime professionals, *habitués* of court ceremonial, and furthermore with unrivalled opportunities of free access to the emperor.⁴ In the sense that they stuck together they did not conform to the emperor's best interests. In combination, they can be seen less as intermediaries and more as an independent force with its own interests, and not always on the emperor's side. We can see them, for example, in action as a group, hammering away at the emperor to secure the execution of Gallus, in support of the policy of the grand chamberlain, Eusebius;⁵ just as we can see them collectively protecting Gorgonius, Gallus' grand chamberlain, from the fate of his master.⁶

To recapitulate: the tension between an absolutist monarch and the other powers of the state; the seclusion of a divine emperor behind a highly formalized court ritual; the need of both parties for intermediaries; the exploitation by eunuchs of this channel for the appropriation to themselves of some of the power of controlling the distribution of favours; the non-assimilability of eunuchs into the aristocracy; the cohesive but non-corporate nature of their corps; and the expertise which resulted from the permanence of their positions as compared with the amateurish, rivalrous and individualistic strivings of aristocrats: all these factors in combination and in interaction can account for the increasing power with which eunuchs were invested, and the continuity with which they, as a body, held it.

¹ Schnee, *op. cit.* vol. 3, pp. 190–1, 195–6, 204.

² E.g. the brilliant homily on vanity of vanities, preached by John Chrysostom over the quaking body of Eutropius who had sought asylum in his church (*P.G.* 52, 2, 391f.), and the eventual official denunciation of Eutropius: 'We command that all his statues, all his images, in bronze and marble... shall be removed from all cities, towns and public and private places, so that the blemish, as it were, of our age may not pollute the sight of viewers.' *C.Th.* 9, 40, 17 (399).

³ *quos quasi a consortio humani generis extorres ab utroque sexu aut naturae origo aut cladis corporis separavit.* Claudius Mamertinus, *Paneg.* 11, 19, 4. The trauma of castration itself might also have strengthened their ties. Justinian cited one example in which 87 out of 90 died from the operation (*N.J.* 142). But if this was the normal rate we should expect to find it reflected in the price. The rates given in a law (*C.J.* 7, 7, 1 (530)) do not do this, but these are not necessarily market prices. For one such cf. *P.Ox.* 1, 95.

⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *op. cit.* 1, 97 (442 C.S.H.B.).

⁵ Ammianus, 14, 11, 3–5.

⁶ *Ibid.* 15, 2, 10; cf. Suidas, s.v. θαλαδίας, and Ammianus, 18, 5, 4.

EUNUCHS AND CHAMBERLAINS: THE CONVERGENCE
OF TWO TRADITIONS

Such general considerations as these, however, though they help to account for the continuity of eunuchs' power and the gradual increase in their rank and influence, can hardly explain their introduction into the palace and their rise to power. For this we have to look at the convergence of two traditions and an external catalyst. The position of chamberlain, *cubicularius*, involving general duties of personal attendance upon a Roman nobleman and the surveillance of visitors, is first recorded in the first century B.C.¹ Its appearance is in line with the progressive specialization of duties within wealthy households. The eunuch chamberlains of the later empire retained these same core duties. But only few of the chamberlains known to us from the early empire are known to have been castrated; the majority were not.²

Eunuchs, on the other hand, had been known to the Mediterranean world from the earliest times.³ They were associated in classical times with certain priesthoods, such as that of Cybele, or with harems such as that of the Persian king.⁴ In the early Roman Empire their use does not seem to have been widespread, though there are an increasing number of references to them in the literature.⁵ Yet occasionally, for example under Claudius, a eunuch is said to have been influential.⁶ By the third century, there is evidence that they were increasingly being employed in private households, probably as attendants upon women. Aurelian limited the number a noble might have.⁷ Yet their position at court at this time seems to have been unstable; except under Elagabalus, there is no evidence to suggest that they wielded power or consistently even filled the post of chamberlain before the reign of Diocletian.⁸

It is my suggestion, therefore, that the consistent use of eunuchs as chamberlains and their exercise of power is likely to have begun with Diocletian and is to be connected with the elaboration of court ritual. There is evidence from a variety of sources that there were eunuchs at work in the palace of Diocletian, and also a suggestion that they were powerful.⁹ It can only be surmise, but may Galerius' capture in his Persian campaign of the Great King's harem have been the occasion of their introduction?¹⁰ This may have acted as the catalyst of the separate traditions of chamberlains and eunuchs. The now divine emperor might well have felt the need for a special type of servitor, and what could be better than those acquainted with the elaborate ritual of the Persian court? Lactantius certainly accused Diocletian's

¹ Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2, 3, 4, 8.

³ Wittfogel, *op. cit.* pp. 354-5 for references.

⁵ Hug, *op. cit.* col. 451.

⁷ S.H.A., *Aurelian*, 49, 8. Cf. Alex. Sev. 23, 5 f.

⁸ *Ibid.*; and *Gordiani III*, 23, 7 f.; but *Carus*, 8, 7.

⁹ B. de Gaiffier, 'Palatins et eunuques dans quelques documents hagiographiques', *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXXV (1957), 17-46; Lactantius, *de mortibus persecutorum*, 15.

¹⁰ Theophanes, I, 11-13 (C.S.H.B.); as the text stands Galerius slaughtered the wives, children and sisters of Narses, and took in capture only the Persian treasures (11), but in his later triumph (13) the wives, children and sisters are displayed. The contradiction is easily solved by restoring the vulg. text, so reading *παρέλαβε καὶ* instead of *καὶ παρέλαβε*.

² Dunlap, *op. cit.* pp. 166-9.

⁴ Herodotus, 3, 48; 8, 104 f.

⁶ Posides; Suetonius, *Claudius*, 28.

successor, Galerius, of imitating the Persian king.¹ In any case eunuchs, wherever they came from, were the proper appurtenance of an emperor, and once established, their power increased for the reasons we have already analysed.

THE EUNUCH IMAGE

The full paradox of the political power of eunuchs cannot be complete without a description of their public image. To some extent, of course, their stereotype was built up as part of the aristocratic objection to the power that eunuchs wielded. But it also reflected the residual characteristics of eunuchs, and the roles they played in social life. It would appear from comparative and contemporary studies that eunuchs have a normal range of intelligence, but that as with domestic animals castration leads in many cases to docility, though a small proportion of hypogonads have compensating aggressiveness.² Further, eunuchs have high-pitched voices, and faces with smooth glossy skins covered with a network of fine wrinkles; they tend to run to fat.³ At court their physical distinctiveness was accentuated by a special white dress.⁴ It must have also reinforced their group solidarity and separateness.

What makes their exercise of power even more remarkable is the range of occupations with which they were normally associated; hordes of them, says Ammianus, looking *obluridi et deformes* cleared the way for the sedan chairs of noble Roman women.⁵ But not only were they used as private attendants upon women,⁶ or their ineluctably safe guardians, but they were occasionally exploited to satisfy the passions of their mistresses.⁷ This could only have occurred to any serious extent with post-adolescent castrates. And there is evidence to suggest that most boys were castrated

¹ *de mortibus persecutorum*, 21; Theophanes connects the success of Galerius' Persian campaign with Diocletian's introduction of *proskynesis* (1, 11). Cf. Aurelius Victor, *de Caes.* 39, 2-4; Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 415; but Alföldi, *op. cit.* and note 2, p. 73 *supra*.

² R. I. Dorfman and R. A. Shipley, *The Androgens* (New York, 1936), p. 319. J. Kasanin and G. R. Biskind, 'Personality Changes following Substitution Therapy in Pre-adolescent Eunuchoidism', *J. Amer. Med. Assoc.* (1943), 1317-21. S. L. Simpson, 'Hormones and Behaviour Patterns', *B.M.J.* (1957), 839. Hypogonads may not be strictly comparable to eunuchs in their social situation, but the sense of deprivation may be a significant common factor. J. J. Matignon, a doctor at the French legation in Peking, who had opportunities to study court eunuchs at first hand, wrote 'C'est à tort qu'on a représenté l'eunuque comme sanguinaire et violent. Il est plutôt doux, conciliant, conscient de son infériorité', *Les eunuques du palais impérial à Pékin*, *Bull. de la soc. d'anthropologie de Paris*, 4 sér. VII (1896), 334. J. J. Bremer, in the most comprehensive recent study of the castration of adult sex criminals, etc., wrote of a 'peculiar emotional lability' among castrates and of an endocrine psychosyndrome (usually of an asthenic and dysphoric-depressive nature) which affected 25% of his sample. He did not find a general pacifying effect in many cases in social behaviour; one cannot tell how far this was affected by the psychopathology of his subjects (*Asexualisation* (Oslo, 1958), pp. 25, 159 f., 309). The same lability is remarked by A. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg, 1922), p. 336.

³ Bremer, *op. cit.* pp. 109-11.

⁴ Sozomen, *H.E.* 2, 9; and cf. R. Guiland, 'Les eunuques dans l'empire byzantin', *Études Byzantines*, 1 (1943), 200.

⁵ Ammianus, 14, 6, 17; cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22, 16 and 32; 54, 13; 66, 13.

⁶ *Vita Melaniae*, 1, 5 (*Anal. Boll.* VIII (1889), 23); Cyril of Alexandria, *sermo contra eunuchos*, P.G. 77, 1108; Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 35 (ed. Butler, 106); *ibid.* 61, 157; Malchus, *frag.* 8.

⁷ Procopius, *Anecdota*, 3, 2; Cyril of Alexandria, *sermo contra eunuchos*, P.G. 77, 1108-9, for a catalogue of their activities; Jerome, *In Jovinianum*, 1, 47, and cf. Juvenal, 6, 366 f.

young.¹ These seem to have been often used as catamites by men, who took advantage of the fact that eunuchs preserved their freshness longer than boys passing through puberty.² To these indignities were added the performances by eunuchs of lewd dances in theatres;³ and in private service too, part of their attraction, as with the hunch-backed jesters of medieval courts, lay in the freakish piquancy of their deformity.

In the descriptions of court eunuchs which survive, these general associations are rarely forgotten. Eutropius progressed from catamite to pander in private service before his elevation to grand chamberlain under Arcadius (395–408).⁴ True, Claudian had a particular axe to grind, and perhaps Eusebius and Chrysaphius would not have suffered so much if they had been on the side of victorious orthodoxy. But perhaps most revealing is the way in which Ammianus hedged his praise of the chamberlain Euthérius:

If a Numa Pompilius or a Socrates should give any good report of a eunuch and should back their statement by a solemn oath, they would be charged with having departed from the truth. But among the brambles roses spring up, and among the savage beasts some are tamed. . . . In unrolling many records of the past, to see which of the eunuchs of old I ought to compare him to, I could find none. True there were in times gone by those that were loyal and virtuous (although very few), but they were stained by some vice or other.⁵

But praise is the exception; more typical of fourth- and fifth-century attitudes, if more than usually vituperative, is the view attributed to St Basil:

. . . lizards and toads . . . the dishonest race of detestable eunuchs, neither men nor women, but made with lust for women, jealous, corruptible, quick-tempered, effeminate, slaves of the belly, avaricious, cruel, fastidious, temperamental, niggardly, grasping, insatiable, savage and envious. What else can I say? Born to the knife, how can their judgement be straight when their legs are crooked? They do not pay for their chastity: the knife has done it. Without a hope of fulfilment they are mad with desires which spring from a natural dirtiness.⁶

One can only imagine the horror with which a blue-blooded aristocrat must have approached such tainted upstarts to beg for favours.⁷

It was easier to curse court eunuchs behind their backs than to their faces. A considerable part of the objection made to their power arose from the lowness of their origins.⁸ Roman eunuchs deserved the soubriquet of eunuchs in China, 'the lucky

¹ Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 45–6; Basil, *Ep.* 115; *C.J.* 7, 7, 1 (530); Petronius, *Satyricon*, 119. Cf. the Chinese custom of early castration, S. W. Williams, *The Middle Kingdom* (New York, 1904), vol. 1, p. 408; and the Spanish, R. P. A. Dozy, *Spanish Islam* (trans. London, 1913), p. 430. The eunuchs had to be trained and educated for the palace service.

² Theophanes, 1, 79; Cyril of Alexandria, *op. cit.* 1108.

³ Prudentius, *Hamartigenia*, 309–10.

⁴ Claudian, *In Eutropium*, 1, 62–150.

⁵ Ammianus, 16, 7, 4 and 8 (Loeb translation). There is a fulsome dedication to the chamberlain Lausus in Palladius' history, but Butler considers it a later bombastic redaction (E. C. Butler, *Historia Lausiaca* (Cambridge, 1904), p. 4). Priscus (frg. 13) says that all men held Chrysaphius in high regard, but this was not a view shared by all (*J. Ant.* frg. 198).

⁶ Basil, *Ep.* 115; cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *op. cit.* 1107–9.

⁷ Ammianus, 18, 4, 3; Sozomen, *H.E.* 4, 16.

⁸ Ammianus, 22, 3, 12 *ab ima sorte ad usque iubendum imperatoria paene elatum*.

risers'.¹ But social mobility in so stable a society offended the interests and the outlook of hereditary aristocrats; and the literature which survives stems mostly from the aristocracy, or reflects their prejudices. Nothing shows the dislike of eunuchs more clearly than their behaviour on retirement. Sundered from the protection of the emperor's favour, they lurked, said Ammianus, like bats in secret hiding places.² At court it was a different story. Their non-assimilability to the aristocracy left them isolated, not as individuals but as a group. And it was as a group that they exercised power. The grand chamberlain and the high officers stole the limelight, but beneath them there must have been a substantial number of chamberlains of all ages gradually progressing upwards through the ranks.³ Their survival depended upon the emperor's favour; the price was that they served his interests;⁴ the rewards were great wealth and high rank; though the greater the power, the higher the risks of sudden demotion and execution.

The violent criticism directed against eunuchs diverted dissatisfaction which might otherwise have been aimed at the emperor. But this was not their only or their most important function. By acting as intermediaries they made the emperor's isolation viable. To be sure other groups as well were used as lubricants for the system, but as in the case of the *notarii* and the *comites*, they were rapidly assimilated to the aristocracy. As can be seen in the increase in eunuchs' rank and the number of offices that they filled, they too progressed by this process of consolidation of privileges, which seems endemic to a patrimonial bureaucracy. Their powers can only be understood in this context of their non-assimilability and their consequent continuity. This applies to the chamberlains with exceptional powers as well as to the run-of-the-mill *castrenses* and *primicerii*. The one was inconceivable without the other. Finally, the exercise of power by eunuchs limited the power of centrifugal forces in the state. Their influence in the Eastern empire was one of the major interacting factors (partly cause, partly result) in the preservation of central monarchic authority. In the West there was a polarization of power between the army who dominated the emperor and the aristocracy who avoided tax payments, whether of men or money. In the East the eunuchs were at the very balance of power between these constituents. Paradoxically, the political power of eunuchs in general, far from being a sign of the emperor's weakness, was, in the Byzantine empire of the fourth and fifth centuries, a token of, and a factor in, the survival of the emperor as an effective ruler.

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¹ Yang, L-S., *Great Families of Eastern Han*, trans. in *Chinese Social History* (Washington, 1956), p. 122.

² Ammianus, 16, 7, 7; Eutherius was an exception and settled in Rome, *ibid.*

³ There is no accurate indication of number. Libanius says they were 'more numerous than flies on sheep in the spring' (*Or.* 18, 130). As an impression only, I should say there were hundreds rather than thousands. If they were taken in young, and given education, and there is evidence that they were (Ammianus, 16, 7, 5, and no accusations of illiteracy), given the high rates of mortality prevalent in the Roman Empire, a fairly large base number would be needed to fill seven top posts with reasonably efficient eunuchs.

⁴ Certainly eunuchs feathered their own nests, but they were not exclusively self-interested. Cf. Ammianus, 21, 15, 4; Malchus, *frg.* 2a; Ambrose, *Ep.* 20, 28; Calligonus, the *praepositus* of Valentinian II, said to Ambrose: *Me vivo, tu contemnis Valentinianum? Caput tibi tollo.*